

The Necessities of the Situation.

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from the point of view of religious liberty. We must not overlook the circumstances of the age, the necessities of the actual situation. The Lutheran Reformation would doubtless have followed the right track if it had disassociated itself far more than it did from the interests of the princes, if it had done more for social progress, less for princely despotism, if it had pursued a higher political as well as spiritual ideal. Very different would the history of Europe have been if this had been possible. To Luther it was not possible, partly owing to the exigencies of the time, partly to the peculiarity of his experience and his personality. He was a religious reformer pure and simple—the man with a mission—and this mission he found, not in the diverse arena of the world but in his cell at Erfurt. He had no wide conception of the movement he started, or of the aspirations of the age in which he lived. He eschewed social and political questions as alien to his purpose, dangerous to his mission. He was the theologian, the doctrinal reformer above all things, and as such he was absorbed in the tremendous conflict with Church and emperor, and was driven by their opposition to seek the support of what was the most powerful body in the empire. He was compelled, whether he liked it or not, to support the princes, as the price of their support of him. Would there have been any reformation at all without their alliance? The fate of Hus would seem to decide that question. And the fate of the peasants shows what a reformation in opposition to the princes had to expect.

Even Luther
would have been crushed had there been no
elector to spirit
him away to the Wartburg, and no Protestant
League of
Schmalkald to intervene between him and the
emperor.
Taking, then, the Lutheran Reformation as
what it was,
and not what it ought to or might have been,
there is after
all something to be said for it from the point of
view of
liberty, despite the poor result achieved for
liberty at Augs
burg. It was a mighty disruption of the
mediaeval Church.
It gave a tremendous shock to the ecclesiastical
despotism
that had lorded it for a thousand years over the
minds and
consciences of men. It asserted the rights of
the individual
soul against the pretensions of a most frightful
tyranny, an
ecclesiastical despotism impersonated in a semi-
divine dictator,
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